

In Memoriam: Sam Ridgway (1936 to 2022)

What the Dolphin Doctor Meant to Me

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Dr. Sam Ridgway meant a lot to a lot of people. The outpouring of love for him on social media after his death spoke to how important he was to our community both professionally and personally. Sam's long career meant that he could see the tangible effects of his influence on subsequent generations of marine mammal veterinarians and scientists. Like many, I too was influenced by Sam. While I have heard it said "you should never meet your heroes," meeting Sam Ridgway—the Dolphin Doctor himself—was one of the greatest moments of my life. Mine is just one story among many, but I hope by giving some perspective of what Sam meant to me, it gives you an opportunity to reflect on your own experiences and allows future generations perspective on just how important Sam Ridgway was to cetacean science.

It is safe to say that without Sam's influence I would have lacked a roadmap for my professional career. I knew from age 3 that I wanted to work with marine mammals, but growing up in a landlocked area, I didn't have much exposure to what that looked like. I was also a below average student with undiagnosed learning disabilities who was very disinterested in the aspects of school that didn't relate to whales and dolphins (cetaceans, as you can imagine, are a fairly small part of an elementary school student's experience). At around age 7 or 8, my parents took my siblings and me to Disney World. At the time, there was a pavilion dedicated to ocean science called The Living Seas (today it is known as The Seas with Nemo and Friends). There, I distinctly remember getting my one souvenir from our trip, a copy of *The Dolphin Doctor* by Dr. Sam Ridgway. The cover font was bold, and the hand-painted illustration of Sam with a dolphin leaping in the background was everything that spoke to me. At the time, I was a poor reader. I remember struggling through the text, and it is quite possible that this was the first real book I ever finished. In the end, however, I knew exactly what I wanted my life to look like. I wanted to work with Tuffy. I wanted to be an aquanaut. I wanted to BE the Dolphin Doctor.

While other kids in my school idolized athletes like Joe Montana and Michael Jordan, I idolized a scientist/veterinarian. In a practical sense, however, Sam's story was proof that someone could do what I wanted to do. On more than one occasion, I remember lending my copy of *The Dolphin Doctor* to teachers as a way of explaining to them what I wanted to be "when I grew up." Because Sam was so accomplished, however, this probably backfired. Outside of cetaceans, I really didn't give teachers much hope that I was capable of learning much. Sam held multiple advanced degrees, and thinking that I too would have to obtain that level of credentials, many of my teachers told me to be more realistic. Advice I was all too happy to ignore.

Over time, progress in the diagnosis of learning disabilities in children led to my increased success academically, and with that, increased hope that I too might be able to follow my dreams of being a marine mammal scientist. I started learning about other scientists in the field, but Sam was always the giant in my mind. Every few years, I would check in with my copy of *The Dolphin Doctor* and read it with the new eyes afforded by maturity and perspective. I followed through and found myself with a Post Doc working with the Sea Mammal Research Unit at the University of St Andrews. At this time, Dr. Andreas Fahlman and I were organizing a workshop for the 2017 Halifax conference on the contributions of animals in managed care to the body of cetacean science. One of our speakers, Professor Peter Tyack, mentioned the possibility of getting Sam to join our workshop as a speaker. It had never dawned on me that this would be possible. Sam was larger than life to me. Peter sent him an e-mail and CCed me. To my stunned surprise, I had an e-mail from Sam in my inbox the same day agreeing to speak at the workshop. I will always be grateful to Peter for sending that e-mail.

The talk Sam gave was "The Navy's Fastest Divers and What They Can Teach Us." Sam needed a little bit of help with our goofy tech set-up and the stairs, so I sat up on stage with him as he spoke. I sat within inches of my childhood hero as he described his amazing career (and I am super grateful to Andreas for getting pictures of that). After Sam's talk, we went into a panel

session where Sam emphasized the role animals under managed care play in scientific discovery. He spoke from a place of authority as someone who knew first-hand what his work with the Navy meant to our understanding of cetacean behavior, acoustics, physiology, neuroscience, cognition, and ultimately conservation. Sam could not say this at the time (his humility prevented it), but it wasn't just the animals under managed care that made all this discovery possible. With creativity, care and curiosity, invention, and genius, Sam paved the way for our field. He had the right mindset to explore marine mammals in this setting, and his work allowed us to make leaps and bounds of progress in these taxa, which I argue are probably some of the most challenging to study in the world.

After the panel, I made sure I got a chance to talk to Sam. I was able to let him know what his work meant to me professionally and personally. I can also say that I am the proud owner of a very beat-up copy of *The Dolphin Doctor* signed by the author himself. Of course, he was as gracious as you could imagine, and if that had been the extent of my time with Sam in the world I would have been content; however, after I made it home from Halifax, I saw a Facebook friend request from Sam himself. To me, this was the equivalent of being a dive bar musician getting a friend request from Bruce Springsteen, Mick Jagger, or Bob Dylan. I was shocked. I expected my heroes to remain on high. However, that wasn't Sam, and over the next 5 years I came to learn how his humility wasn't a practiced artifice but the core of who he was.

He also surprised me with his high engagement on social media. He always had great comments on papers I would share, and he participated in debates we had on various topics of managed care. He sent me relevant articles or even scanned materials from Ken Norris or other giants from the field with their thoughts on the matters of the day. He helped me hone my arguments and helped me see issues I had not considered. Every time my birthday rolled around, I received a "Happy Birthday, Cowboy," an acknowledgment of the mascot of my then institution. It was the one time I, a kid from New York, didn't mind that moniker as I took it as a true compliment from a man born to Bigfoot, Texas.

While Sam and I would never again share a room, through this connection, I now counted him as a friend, in addition to being a hero of mine. It is very likely if Sam had become something else in this world, I would not have become what I became. Sam laid down the blueprint for how to do this and wrote in a way that inspired people from my generation. He helped us figure out what was possible. As marine mammalogists, we could never ask for a better role model. No matter how Sam touched your life, whether it was brief or life-long, I know you were better for it. He made time for us all. He made us feel worthy and that we belonged. He represented the best of our field as a gentleman and scholar. His kindness and humility are a part of his legacy that deserves to stand in parallel with his countless publications and discoveries. We are in Sam's debt.

Thank you Dolphin Doctor!



Tribute to Sam Ridgway
by Dr. Elizabeth Henderson
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When I started working at the Navy Marine Mammal Program a decade ago, Dr. Sam Ridgway was someone I knew by reputation, a “celebrity” in the world of marine mammal biology and acoustics. I knew that he had started the Navy Marine Mammal Program in the 1960s and had pioneered studies on dolphin diving, hearing, and echolocation capabilities, as well as on veterinary treatments for marine mammals under human care. I knew that he had published countless journal articles (more than 350 it turns out!) and several books, including *Mammals of the Sea* (1972) and *The Dolphin Doctor* (1987), as well as co-editing the *Handbook of Marine Mammals* series (1981-1992), all references I had used. I had heard him reflect on his career when he won the Kenneth Norris Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2009 Society for Marine Mammalogy Conference when I was still a graduate student, but I had never had the privilege of meeting him in person, of talking with him about his work and his love of marine mammals.

So, when I started my new job and discovered that my office was across the hall from Dr. Ridgway, I was more than a little intimidated to meet him. However, as anyone who has met Sam knows, Sam was one of the warmest, genuinely kindest individuals I have ever met. We bonded immediately over having both attended Texas A&M University and being Aggies. He was always curious to know what I was working on and was happy to discuss current or past projects of his own, or to answer any questions I might have. I have never worked directly with the Navy animals myself and so have not had the pleasure of watching Sam interact with them, but his love for the animals and his genuine care for their welfare were evident. One project he worked on was an examination of the dolphin’s “victory squeal”—a burst-pulse sound that many of the dolphins would make after getting a trial right during various tasks that was named after “a child’s squeal of delight” (Ridgway et al., 2014). This victory squeal was originally associated with a successful prey capture, but the Navy dolphins began producing it prior to receiving a fish, perhaps in anticipation of receiving their reward. Eventually, they started producing the victory squeal immediately after correctly completing a task, even before a trainer signaled that they were correct—the dolphins were so excited that if they got the task done right that became the reward, the fish was just a nice bonus (for more information on the evolution of the victory squeal, see Ridgway et al., 1991, 2014; Dibble et al., 2016). For months, I would hear playback of the victory squeal emitting from Sam’s



office, often accompanied by his wry chuckle, and I would have to laugh as well. This project is just one of many examples of Sam seeking answers to observations he made about the animals with which he worked. He got so much joy from learning everything he could about marine mammals, and his inquisitiveness was infectious.

I was devastated at the news of Sam’s passing. Since COVID, we both had been primarily working from home, and I regretted not having another opportunity to see him, laugh with him, or hear stories from his life. I spoke to colleagues who had a chance to talk with him in the days prior to his death, and they mentioned how he was still making plans for the future, for more projects, for more gatherings with friends. But then at a recent conference, a colleague announced that Sam had been memorialized by the online project *StoryFile* (<https://exhibit.storyfile.com/?uid=2350&mode=web&si=1&intro=0&topics=1>), through which one could ask questions of a virtual Sam and hear him answer (Schlundt & Stevenson, 2022). It was so wonderful to get another chance to hear Sam’s voice as he recalled memories and highlights of his long career.

It’s not a direct line that leads from Sam’s work to my own, but without his pioneering work with the Navy, and the creation of the Navy Marine Mammal Lab, I would not have had the opportunities I’ve had to study the behavioral impact of noise on marine mammals. I asked my colleague and friend Dr. Brittany Jones, who did work very closely with Sam for the last several years, for some of her recollections of him. I’d like to close with her words:

Dr. Ridgway has always been an incredibly creative and innovative man who was passionate about partnering with the Navy animals to better understand and therefore conserve marine mammal species globally. Although Dr. Ridgway is lovingly known as

the “Father of Marine Mammal Medicine” or the “Dolphin Doctor,” his contributions to science were unparalleled, spanning marine mammal behavior, anatomy, physiology, health, sonar, and communication. The unique thing about Sam was his ability to recognize and foster the incredible potential in others. He lives on through all of us who were lucky enough to be mentored by him, and there is no doubt that his works will continue to educate and inspire future scientists and veterinarians for generations.

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